

MORE OR LESS ABOUT SNAKES

Clifton B. Currin

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This is a short treatise on snakes of the United States. It is primarily intended to help destroy the idea that all snakes are dangerous. There is a slight discussion of distinguishing characteristics of the four varieties of poisonous snakes in the United States.

Snakes are members of the reptile family. They are very widespread in the United States, ranging from one tip of the country to the other.

Man has through ignorance built up a fear of snakes which is almost hereditary. Actually it is not hereditary, but it is passed down from generation to generation and instilled in people from childhood.

Actually in the United States there are only four families of poisonous snakes. Every year, however, there are thousands of harmless snakes killed and the tales told always refer to them as poisonous. Snakes are a great help to the farmer in controlling pests such as rodents and insects.

The poisonous varieties are the rattlesnake, the copperhead, the watermoccasin, and the coral snake. The first three of these are the most prevalent. They are also the ones having the most characteristic differences in appearance from the harmless varieties. The coral has the same eyes, head, and neck as the harmless ones. The other three varieties have slit pupils like a cat, have a generally triangular shaped head, and a prominent neck. The coral and harmless varieties have, in general, round pupils like human beings, a rounded off nose, and head and body join without any noticable contraction in size at the neck.

The rattlesnakes are of various sizes and markings, but all have the characteristic rattle on the tail unless it

has been broken off by rocks or something of the like. There is a mistaken idea that a rattlesnake's age can be told by the number of rattles on his tail. There are two main reasons why this is not true. One is that each button of the rattle is formed by the process of shedding and this may occur several times a year, depending on the weather, injuries to the skin, etc. Secondly, some of the buttons may get broken off.

The copperhead is a bright coppery color with brown saddle marks on its back. Once it is observed, it is easy to recognize again. The watermoccasin is a thick, dark colored, fat snake which is usually found near the water. When it opens its mouth, white, stringy membranes are visible which give it the name cottonmouth.

None of the poisonous snakes of the United States are aggressive under ordinary circumstances. It is only through fear that they attack human beings and they will if possible run to get away from an encounter. The poison of these first three varieties mentioned affects the blood and is not fatal in a good many cases. If treated right away it is very seldom fatal.

The coral snake is the other poisonous variety and is quite deceiving in that its pupils are round and its body is shaped like a harmless snake. It is quite striking in color, though. It is ringed by broad bands of red, yellow, and black. It is particularly dangerous since its poison affects the nervous system. However, it only occurs in the southern part of

Florida and Texas and therefore troubles very few people in the United States.

Snakes are intelligent creatures and can be tamed. The pilot black snake can be made friendly inside of five minutes after capture and will crawl around contentedly and unafraid. There is a technique to doing this but it is quite possible. One snake which puts up a terrific bluff is the hog-nosed snake or puff adder. It hisses and carries on enough to terrorize anyone who is already afraid of snakes.

It is my contention that people should get to know more about snakes and stop destroying them. By far the largest percentage of them are beneficial to man.

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